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The Carpet-Makers of Western Anatolia, 1750–1914

Donald Quataert

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Turkish rugs and carpets started to become a familiar and beloved part of Western middle-class culture. Among the European bourgeoisie it was fashionable at this time to have a "Turkish corner" (*Türkische Ecke*), the idea being to bring the faraway Orient into the home. This furnishing fashion, of which Thomas Mann lovingly wrote, was an elaborately decorated corner of a room, the parlor usually, in which were found various exotica from the Middle East. Included always were some copper or brass plates, trays or former cooking utensils, a Turkish carpet of one sort or another, and, for good measure, a heavily tasseled lamp. Across the Atlantic in America, Oriental rugs also became the rage, but not until the final quarter of the century. The working-class immigrant families may not have had a Turkish corner, but they often covered all of their floors with Oriental rugs.

Despite the rich tradition of rug collecting, little serious scholarly attention has been turned to the artisan creators of Turkish rugs, that is, to the Anatolian carpet-makers. Why is this so? Among many possible reasons let me suggest three. First, Ottoman literature has almost no tradition of writing about the industrial classes. Second, the carpet-makers usually were not patronized by the powerful and wealthy of the Ottoman world, the equivalent of the European middle classes. In fact the nineteenth century was an era when the Ottoman elite sought to Westernize. In this period the knife and fork were introduced to the Ottoman table and Western clothing and novels and theater to their fashion and leisure. In this context, the Ottoman wealthy and powerful were actively disinclined to patronize the makers of local goods such as Oriental rugs. These were part of a *Weltanschauung* from which the elite were trying to escape and even to destroy. The carpet-makers were associated with neither vogue nor power and consequently were over-

looked. And third, the carpet-makers themselves were of modest backgrounds and lives; frequently they were cultivators, of the common classes. Such persons only rarely leave written records of their lives. To sum up, few wrote about them and they didn't write about themselves.

So, how do we know about them? Let me briefly describe the sources available to the social and economic historian of Ottoman carpet-makers. First of all, there are the Ottoman archives in Istanbul. These government archives (*Başbakanlık Arşivi*) hold millions of documents. Most of them are on government matters, but from them the social and economic historian can glean useful data about carpets. There are also consular reports prepared by the diplomatic representatives of the European powers stationed in various areas of the Ottoman Empire. I used the reports of the consuls of Britain, France, Germany, Austria, and Italy. I also found art books from the nineteenth century to be surprisingly useful. For example, there was a special exhibition of Oriental carpets in Vienna in 1891 with a wonderful published account of the rugs. Embedded in technical descriptions of the rugs themselves are rich data on the carpet-knotters and the production process.¹ Yet another source are books by travelers to the carpet-making districts of the Ottoman Empire. Many adventurous Europeans were fascinated by carpets and wrote detailed accounts. It also was useful to compare accounts over time; from such a comparison I learned, for example, that the loom itself did *not* change over the course of the century. The final and very important source is a handful of accounts written in the period of the early Turkish republic by persons intimately involved in the Anatolian rug industry and who wrote books on rug production.² These were part of an effort by the state to save an industry that after World War I seemed to be disappearing rapidly.

The story of the Ottoman carpet in-

dustry between 1750 and 1914 is one of a dizzying series of changes that accelerated as the period developed. The changes, in the broadest sense, were due to a fantastic rise in Western demand for Turkish carpets. Knotted, so-called Oriental rugs, had been known, admired, and used in the West for centuries, and for a long time were considered a luxury item, used only by the European upper classes. But by the mid-eighteenth century, some sources report, a shift in demand had begun to occur. European purchases of Anatolian rugs began to mount and to affect local production and marketing techniques. As late as 1825, only antique rugs were being exported from Western Anatolia to Europe; the real boom was to occur after 1850. The growing interest in Oriental rugs was stimulated by a series of international expositions held in London, Paris, Vienna, and Philadelphia between 1851 and 1876. As a result, by the early twentieth century it is hardly an exaggeration to state that knotted carpets had become a mass consumption item, used in the homes of middle-class and even working-class families, both in Europe and the United States.

Statistics are useful to demonstrate the kind of sea change that took place in Anatolian rug-manufacturing in the nineteenth century as a result of European demand. In the first decade of the century, the leading carpet-producing town in Anatolia, Uşak, was exporting 50 to 60 thousand square meters of carpets to Europe.³ In the last decade of that same century, Uşak was exporting over 440 thousand square meters of carpets to Europe and America. Carpet exports from the Ottoman Empire as a whole jumped from circa 17 million piasters in the late 1870s to over 32 million by the mid 1890s. Most of these carpet exports went through the Aegean port of Izmir. In the 1870s alone the value of rug exports from Izmir doubled and by the end of the century had doubled again. Izmir carpet exports that were valued at 123 thousand pounds sterling in the late 1870s were worth 334 thousand pounds in 1908.⁴

For much of the nineteenth century the major centers of export production were four towns in western Anatolia: Uşak, Kula, Gördes, and Demirci. Uşak

had been a major center for centuries. Until the 1890s, it alone accounted for two-thirds to three-quarters of all carpets produced for sale in Anatolia. At Uşak, production doubled between 1870 and 1890 and rose another fifty percent in the following decade.⁵ This sharply rising demand brought a number of vital changes to Anatolian rug-making: (1) increasing European control of the work site; (2) increasing use of aniline dyes and, later, other chemical substitutes for natural dyes; (3) introduction of factory-made wool yarn; (4) sharp increases in the size of the work force and a proportionate increase in the number of Armenian and Greek knotters; (5) increasing numbers of workshops outside the home as a supplement to household manufacture of carpets; (6) lowering of wages and intensification of the work pace; and, finally, (7) diffusion of carpet-making techniques over a much broader area of Anatolia than had been seen in the early nineteenth century. In some cases, carpet-making was reintroduced into areas where it had been neglected for centuries; in other areas, it was introduced for the first time.

Geography and climate favored the development of carpet-making in western Anatolia, in regions such as Uşak. The traditional carpet-making district was located in the zone between the coastal plain and the high plateau, at about a thousand meters in elevation, where the sparse rainfall averages 450 to 500 millimeters per year. In this area the soil is poor and not very suitable for agriculture. Nearly forty percent of the Uşak land surface was meadow or pastureland and hence capable of supporting the sheep that provided the wool. Available running water, moreover, facilitated the necessary washing of the wool.

Information on the industry is scarce before the 1850s. We know that demand for knotted rugs had risen substantially by that date. The industry in the first half of the century was encountering difficulty maintaining standards; shoddy knotting and dyeing practices were not rare. Furthermore, demand pressures were so great that by about 1850 the Uşak-area weavers abandoned the making of woven kilims to concentrate exclusively on the knotting of rugs, which they judged to be

more profitable.⁶

Our first close up view of the industry focuses on the town of Uşak and is from the 1860s. At that time, a form of "putting out" already was well established. Several Turkish merchants placed orders with local carpet-makers, advancing to some of them the money or materials needed to make rugs, with the agreement to buy the finished product at a specified price. Among these merchants were members of the Yilancioglu family that in the 1770s had set up a firm that commissioned rugs; this family remained prominent in the industry at least through the 1930s.⁷ The dating of the Yilancioglu business is important because it indicates that by the 1770s the rugs were becoming increasingly marketable.

By the mid nineteenth-century, the rug business had advanced to the point that Hacı Ali Efendi, cited as the most important of the Turkish merchants, had a network of three thousand working homes in and around Uşak that produced eighty-four thousand square meters of carpet. Ali Efendi sent a large shipment of rugs for an international exhibition held in 1867. Some foreigners, however, were already engaged in carpet-making at Uşak as early as the 1830s. British merchants in particular became more active as important changes began to take place in the use of dyestuffs. By the early 1850s, European chemists had begun to develop various substitutes for dyes once obtained only from nature. By the end of the century artificial dyes that were reliable, if used correctly, were available for most colors. Some Anatolian carpet-makers adopted the artificial dyes because they were cheaper and easier to use than the natural materials and also the new dyes could create the color schemes preferred by European and American buyers. In the 1850s, for example, an entirely new style of rug came into existence, for sale exclusively to the American market. This style was known as "Zarif Ali" and characterized by very deep colors, such as deep blue and Bordeaux red.⁸ In the context of booming foreign demand, there was the potential for great profits. Demand sharply increased carpet prices: for example, Uşak carpet prices rose by at least fifty percent between the 1840s and the 1870s.

The opportunity for great profits brought great temptations. Some producers rushed rugs to market with less than usual care. The pell-mell and often careless adoption of aniline dyes posed a threat to the industry and damaged the reputation of traditional production centers such as Uşak.⁹

The confusion caused by the boom market and the use of aniline dyes brought about a decline in rug quality and even in sales. We know that as early as the 1840s, local Uşak entrepreneurs and the Ottoman government enacted a number of measures to improve the declining quality of carpets. The entrepreneurs complained that traditional patterns were being abandoned, a clear reference to the trend of producing according to European taste. The solution, they said, was twofold: to find someone locally who would supervise a return to established motifs, and to import machines from Europe for the production of carpets.¹⁰ This initiative failed, however, and European merchants directly intervened in the carpet industry of Uşak and other established Anatolian centers.

From the 1870s, European merchant houses, usually based in Izmir, more and more closely regulated the production processes through agents that they sent into the interior. It probably was at this time that dyers from Europe were brought to the carpet centers of Uşak, Kula, and Demirci in order to oversee use of the new dyes. Many dye houses now fell under the domination of the Izmir-based merchant houses. Frequently, the dye houses were owned by the agents of the Izmir merchants. These agents distributed the Izmir merchants' rug orders among local producers for a three-percent commission, but made most of their money from the dye houses. The agents required that all rug producers under contract to them use only the dyes of their particular dye house. So on the one hand, European-dominated merchant houses controlled an increasingly large segment of the carpet industry, while on the other hand Ottoman companies continued to play a vital, if relatively diminishing, role, maintaining their own networks of producers and selling directly to customers in Europe.

Carpet-making involves a variety of steps, and to understand the industry it is necessary to follow production process and division of labor. First, raw wool must be obtained, washed, and cleansed; then it must be spun into yarn and the yarn dyed; and finally the yarn is ready to be knotted into carpets on looms. These various steps can be performed by one person or by several persons. In Anatolia the number of persons engaged in the production of a rug varied in relation to the involvement of the particular area in sale production. The greater the commitment of the region to export, the more refined the division of labor.

For most of the nineteenth century, the division of labor in making rugs at Uşak differed from that of the other Anatolian centers and, generally, was more sharply drawn than elsewhere. In the early 1870s, we see that men from the towns and villages near Uşak were washing and bleaching the wool. Until about 1850 Uşak, Kula, Gördes, and Demirci had provided their own wool for carpet production. But as demand and production grew, these centers had to produce additional wool from other areas of Anatolia. After the wool was washed, women (referred to as "old women" in some sources) then spun the wool at home.¹¹ In the Uşak area, most of the yarn was spun by hand, since the yarn that hand spinning produced was more loosely made and therefore more suitable to carpet production.¹² Relatively few women, apparently, used spindles, although their use was known. As demand for carpets mounted, the rising yarn needs of Uşak continued to be met exclusively by the local domestic industry until the 1890s. Increased production meant that either more persons had to become spinners or that the existing work force had to spend more hours making yarn and fewer hours on domestic tasks or agricultural labor. By the mid 1880s virtually every house in the town was engaged in some aspect of carpet-making. And yet the need for yarn continued to rise as Uşak carpet output tripled between 1885 and 1896. In the 1890s, Uşak carpet-makers resorted to yet another stratagem to increase production, one that involved a gender shift in labor division. "The wool cleaning, spinning

and dyeing is done exclusively by men," reported a usually reliable source of the period.¹³ In this part of Anatolia men took on the spinning tasks to increase total yarn production and to permit the women more time for knotting.

After spinning the yarn was dyed. At some important production centers, such as Kula, women dyed the yarn. At Uşak, the dyeing tasks once had been done by women,¹⁴ but during the nineteenth century they became the preserve of a separate group of male workers. In Uşak (but not, apparently, in the other production centers) the dyeing of yarn became separated from the knotting functions. Various sources dating from the 1880s suggest this differentiation of function had occurred in living memory. It is most likely related to the phenomenon of rising demand and increasing European control of the dye works that was well underway during the 1870s. It is probably at this time that Uşak women gave up the dyeing functions and turned them over to the local men.

The carpet knotters of Uşak were exclusively women and young girls. In contrast, at other established carpet centers, such as Kula and Gördes, men as well as women knotted and wove carpets.¹⁵ The employment of men in the knotting of rugs at these other two towns is noteworthy, for it contradicts common assumptions about jobs that supposedly were either female or male tasks. At least at Kula and Gördes men and women shared jobs, interchanging job functions when necessary.

The number of loom operators, that is knotters, at Uşak rose steadily in the nineteenth century, underlining the growing commitment and dependency of the town on the carpet trade. In the early 1880s in the Uşak area, some three thousand women and five hundred girls worked more or less year-round on some six hundred looms. By 1900, their number had increased to some six thousand women and girls working on approximately twelve hundred looms. Thus the number of looms and workers doubled as output tripled and the town reached maximum production levels given its population and the prevailing technologies.

One has the sense that the town strained every resource to meet demand.

Statistics tell only part of the story; there are other accounts as well. To allow work hours to extend into the night, the knotters wore miners' helmets, the oil lamps casting the necessary light to allow the work to continue.¹⁶ In the 1880s, when the amount of wool to wash began outstripping the town water supply, local merchants pooled their resources and constructed a channel that brought water from some two and one-half hours away.¹⁷ Yet another record from the 1890s indicates that after a terrible fire had ravaged Uşak, merchant houses in London sent construction engineers to hurry its rebuilding and thus minimize foreign investment losses in carpet production.¹⁸

Without exception, knotters in the traditional production centers such as Uşak worked in private homes. A saying of the local weavers explains: "One of the greatest values of rug making is that it adapts to the needs of the family."¹⁹ The knotters could adjust the work place to family considerations and to the needs of the agricultural cycle. The knotting techniques employed and the loom itself do not seem to have changed over the course of the nineteenth century. Uşak knotting families owned their looms, and some houses possessed two, three, or even four looms. Depending on the size of the rug, up to eight persons worked side by side on a loom. Work hours varied by season, with usually five to seven hours at home in the winter time and nine to twelve hours in the summer. When a new pattern was introduced on the loom, a more experienced knitter directed the others. Operations were supervised by the mistress of the house. Workers who were not members of the family of the loom owner were paid either by the day or by the piece; both systems of payment coexisted simultaneously. Typically, young girls of seven to eight years were apprenticed to a master craftswoman to learn the trade. The apprenticeship lasted, depending on the child, from two to three years. At Uşak, Muslims, who made up eighty-five percent of the town population, dominated the knotting tasks and rug-making in general.²⁰

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, four sets of innovations were introduced that enhanced Anatolian rug

production. The first of these was relatively minor, but nonetheless interesting. In 1895 the Ottoman government established a separate carpet factory at the town of Hereke, now nearly a suburb of Istanbul on the Asian side. To introduce carpet-making techniques, the state imported an Uşak carpet-making family. Within a decade, rug-making had taken hold and some 1,150 female knotters from the area around Hereke were making custom carpets at the government-owned factory. Turkish and Greek girls, from four to fifteen years of age, worked in three great knotting halls on 150 to 180 knotting frames of varying sizes. Since the factory worked only with preordered designs, the women on one loom might be making a Persian design while a European pattern was being knotted on the neighboring loom. The knotters were provided with patterns that specified not only the number of knots but also the color arrangements of the section they were knotting. The practice of using a photograph or sketch pattern was widely adopted in the late nineteenth-century Anatolian rug production, not only at new production centers such as the Hereke factory, but at Uşak as well. Here one sees the "deskilling" of a craft, reducing it to a process accessible to a larger number of workers and therefore susceptible to lower-wage rates. Except for the very youngest girls, the knotters worked eleven hours per day. The factory provided a school and a hospital for its employees. Some of the female workers walked to the factory from their homes nearby, but others came from distant villages and lived in dormitories provided by the factory; Greek and Turkish girls lived apart, in separate dormitories, under the supervision of old women.²¹

The second set of innovations occurred at just about the same time that the state built the Hereke rug factory, when efforts were made to found mechanized systems to make wool yarn for carpet production. There were several earlier unsuccessful attempts at Uşak and near Eskişehir that failed for a number of reasons, including opposition from local spinners and merchants. But then, in the late 1890s and the early twentieth century, Ottoman entrepreneurs opened three mechanized yarn-

spinning factories in the town of Uşak. Within several years the three mills were producing annually more than a thousand kilograms of yarn per day and employing some two thousand persons, mainly women. It was just prior to the establishment of these factories that Uşak men had taken up spinning. It seems clear that the mills were founded to break the bottleneck holding back increased rug production. With the founding of the factories, the entrepreneurs intended to provide their own knotters with increased quantities of yarn. Also, at least some of the women who had been spinning yarn would be freed to spend more time knotting. The efforts of the entrepreneurs were not, however, appreciated by the women of nearby villages and tribes who once had spun at home. The new factories also threatened the merchants competing with the three entrepreneurs. The unhappy spinners and merchants joined together and finally, in 1908, unemployed spinners, a crowd mainly of women and children, attacked and destroyed the three factories, carrying off great quantities of stored wool and smashing the engine rooms. The riots continued for several days as crowds of up to fifteen hundred, usually women, demonstrated in the streets and demanded that the factories remain permanently closed.²²

Ironically, the establishment of these factories occurred just as carpet production in the town peaked. The levels of production could not be surpassed, the director of an Uşak bank complained in 1900, because there were not enough looms. Orders, he said, had risen 150 percent but simply could not be filled on time because of the insufficiency of looms.²³

In fact, at the time of the banker's complaint, the quantity of carpets made in Uşak leveled off, and the relative importance of the town actually declined after 1900. The decline is related to the third important innovation that enhanced the production of rugs in Anatolia as a whole: the diffusion of commercial rug-making outside the traditional areas and the establishment of work sites outside the home for the manufacture of rugs. Since the 1850s, Izmir and Istanbul merchant houses had encouraged production in other areas and had boosted the volume

of rug-making by substantial proportions. The pattern was that already seen in the example of the Hereke factory. Experts were obtained from an existing center of production, commonly Uşak, and brought to an area to teach production techniques to the local inhabitants. This technological diffusion, not unreasonably, was resisted by the traditional centers that understood the threat posed. For example, in 1888 an entrepreneur at Isparta, later to become an important rug-making center, sought to begin carpet production in the area. He sent a representative to Uşak to bring back an expert, "But," in his own words, "a rugmaker there named Tirit Mehmet Paşa, thinking in a narrow-minded manner to keep rugmaking restricted to Uşak, sent back the man I had sent without learning a single thing."²⁴ The "narrow-minded" man turned out to be one of the yarn factory entrepreneurs mentioned above.

In some of the regions where merchants introduced the craft, for example, Kütâhya and Kayseri, large numbers of Greek and Armenian women were employed as loom operators. These new workers often were fully dependent on the merchants. Within the Uşak rug-making community, by comparison, loom-workers differed considerably in their ability to retain their status as independent artisans. The least independent knotters at Uşak were the women who used dyed yarn provided by the merchant. But even the most dependent of these fared well relative to many of the Armenian and Greek knotters elsewhere who recently had been brought into carpet-making by merchants. These women sometimes did not even own their own looms and were provided them as well as their supplies by the merchants. The new rug-makers worked faster and earned less than those at established centers such as Uşak.

By contemporary Ottoman standards Uşak carpet knotters earned very little; their wages were perhaps the lowest of all Ottoman industrial workers. But in locations where the merchants had recently founded knotting centers, at Sivas and Burdur for example, the knotters earned some forty percent less for the number of knots tied than did their counterparts at Uşak. In many of these new centers, fur-

thermore, the merchants established centralized workshops to which the women came and worked. At Uşak most knotters worked at home, interrupted by children and other family tasks, and a good worker averaged some five thousand to six thousand knots per day. In workshops elsewhere in Anatolia, however, knotters were working outside the home and under close supervision, and they were required to work a specified number of hours per day. Such factors, combined with other practices, increased the work pace to as many as fourteen thousand knots per day, more than twice that of the Uşak worker.²⁵

The diffusion of rug-making to areas outside the four towns is very similar to patterns in Europe where merchants established production networks in the countryside to escape the urban guilds. In our example here, the four towns virtually monopolized rug production. To break this stranglehold and enhance their own profits by lowering costs, merchants set up production networks in areas beyond the reach of the four traditional centers. There, like their counterparts in Europe, the merchants found a cheaper and more pliant work force that expanded production at lower costs.

The establishment of these new production centers and workshops are the major factors that account for the continued increases in Anatolian carpet production after the 1890s. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the traditional carpet centers of Uşak, Kula, Gördes, and Demirci together contained thirty-six hundred carpet-making looms. Elsewhere in western Anatolia, the carpet merchants had established a new nexus containing over twelve thousand looms dedicated to producing rugs for export.²⁶

In 1908, the final innovation, the last element in the Anatolian carpet-making equation, fell into place. This was the Oriental Carpet Manufacturers, Ltd., a trust formed by a group of Izmir-based rug merchant houses, all of them European. They founded the company in an effort to corner the market and control production processes still more tightly. This carpet trust became the major single factor in the Anatolian rug industry; by 1913 it controlled as much as seventy-five percent of

the total rug production in the region. In the process it made excellent profits for its shareholders. For the five years before World War I, it paid dividends that averaged over eighteen percent. In western and central Anatolia the trust employed at least fifty thousand knotters of both sexes. In a number of towns and cities the company established additional numbers of centralized workshops employing, typically, Greek and Armenian knotters who gathered to make rugs from yarn that had been spun and dyed in company factories established at Bandırma and Izmir. At fourteen other locations, including Uşak, the trust established agencies where all its employed loom operators were required to use only yarn that had been dyed in the factories of the trust.²⁷

Thus, under the control of the Oriental Carpet Manufacturers, Ltd., Ottoman Anatolian carpet production increased one final time. But true to the pattern of the preceding century, production increases had a price. The Ottoman rug-making industry lost still more of its independent character, and its artisans fell under yet more stringent European control.

This article is based on a lecture sponsored by the Marshall and Marilyn Wolf Foundation that I presented at The Textile Museum in February 1987. For a more detailed analysis of the industry, see my article "Machine Breaking and the Changing Carpet Industry of Western Anatolia, 1860-1908," Journal of Social History (Spring 1986), 473-489 and the sources cited therein.

Notes

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23. See note 8 above.
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25. Compare the source cited in note 9 above with Great Britain, Foreign Office 424/213, Young to O'Connor, Trabzon, 8 June 1907 and with Preben Liebetrau, *Oriental Rugs in Colour* (New York, 1963), 17.
26. See note 20.
27. Annual Reports of the Oriental Carpet Manufacturers, Ltd., 1909-1918.

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